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The Kena Upanisad

TRANSCREATED FROM SANSKRIT

by

P. Lal

A Writers Workshop Publication

The Transcreator

P. Lal is honorary Professor of English in St. Xavier's College, Calcutta. He was Special Professor of Indian Studies, at Hofstra University, New York, 1962-63, and has lectured widely on Indian literature to English, American, and Australian universities. He was a delegate from India to the P.E.N. International Writers Conference in New York in June 1966, and Visiting Professor in the University of Illinois for the spring semester of 1968. Transcreated the Bṛhadāranyaka and Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣads on a Jawaharlal Nehru Fellowship award in 1969-70. Visiting Professor of Comparative Literature, Hofstra University, spring 1971. Distinguished Visiting Professor and Consultant, Albion College, April-May 1972. Prentiss M. Brown Distinguished Visiting Professor, Albion College, January-May 1973. Robert Norton Visiting Professor, Ohio University, September 1973-June 1974. Visiting Professor of Indian Culture, Hartwick College, September-October 1975. Eli Lilly Visiting Professor, Berea College, February-May 1977. Honorary Doctorate of Letters, Western Maryland College, 1977. Currently at work on the complete English version of the Mahābhārata. He is sixty-eight, married, and has a son, 41, and a daughter, 37. Recipient of the Padma Shri award in 1970. Delegate to Asian Poets' Conference, Bangkok, 1988; Cambridge Literary Seminar, 1989; Harborfront Poetry Reading Series, Toronto, Canada, 1989.

Dedication

to
M. V. R. Murty
of
the S. E. R. Hotel in Puri
a model karma-yogi
whose dedication
is
an inspiration

Acknowledgments

I have gone through more than a dozen translations of the Upaniṣads by Indian and foreign scholars. I have been amazed by the similarities in many of them—and even more amazed by the divergencies of understanding and opinion. Some have preferred to go by tentative personal insights, others have abided by safe institutional interpretations. I thank them all for many helpful guidelines. My preference is clear. The sincere and humble personal search is, I think, more precious than the complete conviction of the adamantine Establishment. He who says he knows, does not know. He who questions, humbly, may get to know. That seems to be the basic teaching of the Upaniṣads.

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By the Same Author

UPANIṢADS
TRANSCREATED

Īśā
Bṛhadāraṇyaka
Mahānārāyaṇa
Avyakta
Muṇḍaka
Māṇḍūkya
Kaṭha
Kena

IN PREPARATION

Śvetāśvatara
Kaivalya
Chāndogya
Taittirīya
Praśna

Preface

THE CURIOSITY IS CEASELESS: WHAT IS THIS ACTIVITY called "transcreation"? The word is now ensconced in *The Oxford New Learner's Dictionary* (1997) and its definition there suggests that it is a kind of "creative translation". I brought out a revised edition of my monograph titled *Transcreation* in the same year. It contains seven essays dealing with the art of transcreation as I have practised it over the last fifty years while Englishing Sanskrit, Hindi, Punjabi and Bengali texts—these being the languages I have a reasonable knowledge of.

I can only speak of the tools I have found useful when I transcreate. Other devotees of the art may have other precious "gadgets" and know-how. There is no dogma, no golden rule. One does the best one can. There is no competition in this field—hence no envies or put-you-downs. The aim is to carry over quality from one language into another. Every translator/transcreator has a different nation of what that quality is, where it lies, and how excellently to mine the ore.

I depend on four principles.

First: Instinct. This could be genetic intuition; it could even be described loosely as inspiration. Born Indian, a Punjabi Hindu, with a father who believed intellectually in the values of the Arya Samaj and a mother who was a devout Vaiṣṇavite with a pious faith in the worship of Krishna as Bālagopāla, I passed through a very intense Catholic instruction from the

Jesuit Fathers of St Xavier's School and College in Calcutta during 1935-1952. I took almost instinctively to religion, Catholic and Hindu. I took the religious texts to be "true" because they were to me supreme poetry. My instinct loved the poetry in them. I first transcreated the ***Bhagavad-Gītā*** in college in 1947 in rhymed and metrical English verse. Then the Upaniṣads—again because my instinct pulled me to the poetry I found in them. Nature poetry, narrative poetry, patriotic poetry, love poetry paled before this wondrous phenomenon of religious poetry. I ***had*** to relish this poetry intimately—and there was no better way than to transcreate it. Yes, there are difficulties—small challenges, but significant ones. If it is religious poetry I am transcreating, not poetic religion; mystic poetry, not poetic mysticism—then I must honour the melodic line, the memorable loose or strict stanza structure for every śloka. Individual words must genuflect to the chantable totality. Ananta-Viṣṇu—what Viṣṇu is it? Unending, endless, without end, limitless, infinite, without limit? The synonyns are not interchangeable. The right choice of word depends entirely on the "music" of the entire śloka and its English "equivalent". No concessions or compromises here.

Second: Experience. Once one starts translating/transcreating, problems crop up, the attempts to solve which add to the quality of one's awareness of language, of bi-cultural communication, of the right choice of word and phrase and melodic line to capture the nuances of meaning and feeling in the original. Since no two experiences in this activity are identical, one has to fashion one's own "idiom" and "structure". My life-experience is my life-experience; the text must make sense to me on *my* terms before I can pass it on in any form to others. In the process, I learn humility,

simplicity, perspicacity, even (I dare to say) integrity. Religious and spiritual texts are character-building blocks. Even if they don't succeed in making a perfect piece of disciplined architecture of oneself, they do teach lessons of culture, of the nature of this world, of life and its complexities, and above all, they give glimpses of the magic of the words we speak and the mystery of the Word that is beyond speech. Concurrent with transcreation-experience is life-experience. No book is a dead text for one who loves what's in it. Print is dead bones; love breathes life.

Third: Lucidity. When Arjuna questions Krishna, when Krishna answers Arjuna, when Yājñavalkya enlightens Maitreyī, when Naciketā corners Death, and when Death replies to Naciketā, when the anonymous seeker in the Kena Upaniṣad is solaced by the seer's explanations, no butler-like footnotes and elaborations stand in the way of the listener's (or the reader's) direct involvement. Christ's disciples (praise be!) were fishermen, not scholars, academicians, dialecticians, metaphysicians, philosophers, theologians, or deconstructionists. Dialogue, Socratic or Shakespearean or Vyāsan, requires no visa, no explanatory padding. If it is not clear immediately, it is not good dialogue. It is not good manners either. Ganeśa the scribe can wait to understand the śloka before he pens it down. Once down, there is no waiting. Instant clarity is paramount. If Śrī Krishna has to gloss his gospel, it is no gospel. It becomes that most tedious of things—a treatise, a *ṭīkā*, a philosophical dissertation, a scholar's Vaikuṇṭha and a layman's nightmare. Śaṅkara is not Krishna; Śaṅkara is Śaṅkara. Like Ganeśa, I have waited—quite often a very long wait—before transcreating the ślokas. They are, I hope, now not opaque. Ambiguity of meaning is understandable and pardonable; ambiguity of expression is not. To the reader who has done the

minimal homework essential before entering any serious text, the meaning should be clear. I have not allowed footnotes to stain the white radiance of this eternity.

Fourth: Discovery. Oh yes. I do not transcreate a text because I "know" what it is about. No one knows what a luminous text is about until he or she goes about translating/transcreating it. Maybe not even then. Every attempt to transcreate a sacred text is a voyage of sunlit discovery. Indeed, we net coral when we trawl for fish. We lift a stone, and start a wing. We turn a corner, and stumble on the Valley of Flowers. In every Upaniṣad I have transcreated, I have chanced upon unsuspected beauties of expression and insight. Mine eyes dazzle.

May my reader also embark on a similar voyage in the Hiraṇyagarbha, the realm of the Golden Womb.

One small act of contrition. In śloka 11:2:25 there is no mention of Tat or Brahman or any Divinity by name. I have here used "God". This God, however, is the Ultimate Ineffable Upaniṣadic Oṁ-transcendent Divinity; none other.

Puri
October 1997

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THE KENA UPANIṢAD

SECTION 1

1 Whose will makes the mind think?
Whose will makes *prāṇa*
the first-of-all life-breath,
breathe?
Whose will makes people speak
the words they speak?
Which god energises the eye and the ear?

2 The Ear of the ear
The Mind of the mind
The Speech of speech
The *Prāṇa* of *prāṇa*
The Eye of the eye . . .
The wise know what to give up.
When they leave this world
leaving the unreal and knowing the Real
they become immortal
they taste the nectar of *amṛta*.

3 Neither eye reaches there
nor speech
nor mind.
We do not know what It is.
It cannot be taught.

4 It is not what you know
It is not even what you do not know.
This is what we have heard
from the wise teachers
who lived in the past.

5 That alone is Brahman
whom speech cannot reach
That alone is Brahman
who energises speech
That is not the Brahman
whom people worship.

6 That alone is Brahman
whom eyes cannot see
That alone is Brahman
who makes eyes see
That is not the Brahman
whom people worship.

7 That alone is Brahman
whom ears cannot hear
That alone is Brahman
who makes ears hear
That is not the Brahman
whom people worship.

8 That alone is Brahman
whom breath cannot breathe
That alone is Brahman
who makes breath breathe
That is not the Brahman
whom people worship.

SECTION 2

1 If you think 'How well I know Brahman',
it is clear how little you know Brahman,
the form and shape and nature of Brahman.
You know it as it appears
in the individual human body,
You know it as it appears
in the forms of the gods.
Think a little better
if you want to know It better.

2 I do not know Brahman well—
this I do believe.
It is not that I do not know.
I do know—
and at the same time I do not know.
Only that one among us knows
who knows what this means:
"Neither do I know
nor do I not know."

3 He knows
to whom Brahman is unknown.
He does not know
to whom It is known.
They know It
who say they do not know It.
They do not know It
who say they know It.

4 To experience Brahman
on all levels of consciousness
is to taste the nectar
of non-death called *amṛta*.
Such experience
invigorates.
Such experience
liberates.

5 To experience this
in this life itself
is to experience
the essence of truth.
Not to experience this
in this life itself
is to live a life
of loss and ruin.
The wise person who realises
the presence of Brahman
in the world's creatures
moving and unmoving—
such a person
withdraws from the world
and experiences the nectar
of non-death *amṛta*.

SECTION 3

1 Of course it was Brahman
who won the victory
for the sake of the gods.
But the pride of the gods
said, "This victory is ours.
The glory is ours."

2 Of course it was Brahman,
knowing of their pride,
who appeared before them.
Confused, they said,
"Who is this *yakṣa*,
this celestial form?"

3 So they summoned Agni,
the god of fire, saying.
"O Jātaveda,
Omniscient One,
who is this *yakṣa*?"
"I will find out," he said.

4 When Agni approached him,
the *yakṣa* enquired,
"Who are you?"
"I am Agni, no less.
I am Jātavedā,
the Omniscient One."

5 "Is that so?"
replied the *yakṣa*.
"How powerful are you?"
"I can burn everything,
I can burn whatever
there is in this world."

6 Producing a straw,
"Burn this," said the *yakṣa.*
Flaming furiously,
Agni rushed forward
but failed to burn it.
Leaving the *yakṣa,*
he returned to the gods.
"I do not know
who this *yakṣa* is."

7 So the gods summoned Vāyu,
the god of wind, saying,
"O Vāyu,
find out for us
who this *yakṣa* is."
"It will be done."

8 When Vāyu approached him,
the *yakṣa* enquired,
"Who are you?"
"I am Vāyu, no less.
I am Mātariśvā.
I sweep through space."

9 "Is that so?"
replied the *yaksa.*
"How powerful are you?"
"I can blow away things,
I can blow away whatever
there is in this world."

10 Producing a straw,
"Blow away this," said the *yakṣa*,
Flailing furiously,
Vāya rushed forward
but failed to do so.
Leaving the *yakṣa*,
he returned to the gods.
"I do not know
who this *yakṣa* is."

11 So the gods went to Indra,
the chief god, saying,
"O Maghavā,
find out for us
who this *yakṣa* is."
"It will be done."
As Indra approached,
the celestial being
disappeared in a flash.

12 And in the sky
a girl materialised,
Umā Haimavatī,
Lady of the Hills,
Daughter of the Himalayas,
exquisitely ornamented,
surpassingly lovely.
He approached her and asked,
"Who was the *yakṣa*?"

SECTION 4

1 "Brahman," she replied.
"It was Brahman's victory,
Yours only the pride."
From the words of Umā
Indra realised
the *yakṣa* was Brahman.

2 Because Agni and Vāyu
and Indra were the ones
who came closest to Brahman,
who were first to know Brahman,
they are the gods
who excel other gods.

3 Because Indra was the one
who came closest to Brahman,
because he was the first
to recognise Brahman,
he is the god
who excels other gods.

4 Study these two
celestial similes
on the nature of Brahman:
Brahman is like
a flash of lightning,
the wink of an eye.

5 Know this: Only Brahman
is the Adorable One, *tadvanam*.
Worship only Brahman
as the Adorable One.
Respected is one
who worships Brahman thus.

6 "O please teach me
the Upaniṣad."
"I have already taught you
whatever in the Upaniṣad
deals with the nature
of Brahman.

7 Here is the knowledge: *tapaḥ*,
creative austerity;
damaḥ, self-discipline,
karma, dedicated duty.
These are Its body.
Its limbs are the Vedas.
Its heart is truth.

8 Who has this knowledge
overcomes all weaknesses
and securely abides
in the celestial realm
of eternal bliss,
svarge loke."

ॐ

śāntiḥ śāntiḥ śāntiḥ

Writers Workshop • Indian Creative Writing in English •

WRITERS WORKSHOP Creative Writing

WRITERS WORKSHOP was founded in 1958. It *consists of a group of writers who agree in principle* that English has proved its ability, as a language, to play a creative role in Indian literature, through original writing and transcreation. Its task is that of defining and substantiating that role by discussion and diffusion of creative writing and transcreation from India, the Commonwealth, and other English-using territories.

Discussions are held on Sunday mornings at 162/92 Lake Gardens, Calcutta 700045, India, and diffusion done through a series of Bird-logo books issued under the WORKSHOP imprint. Since 1971 the WORKSHOP has laid increasing emphasis on its publishing programme. A complete, descriptive 90-page illustrated checklist of over 3000 books and cassettes is available for Rs. 10.

The WORKSHOP in non-profit and non-political. It involves writers who are sympathetic to the ideals and *principles commonly accepted as embodied in creative* wrtinig; it is concerned with practice not theorising, helpful criticism not iconoclasm, the torch not the sceptre.

The WORKSHOP publishes a periodical book-magazine, *The New Miscellany*, devoted to creative writing. It is not a house journal; as a rule it gives preference to experimental work by young and unpublished writers, its two chief criteria for selection being high imaginative awareness and mature technique. Established writers appear in its pages if their work meets those standards. *The New Miscellany* does not carry advertising. Sufficient postage (registered mail) should accompany book manuscripts and magazine submissions if their return is desired. Only typed submissions are considered.

One can become a member or an Associate by written application to the Secretary, which requires the support of two members and approval by majority on committee. Members are writers with published work to their credit. To be an Associate requires agreement with the aims and objects of WRITERS WORKSHOP, active interest in creative writing, and a willingness to lend practical assistance to WORKSHOP activities. Subscription to *The New Miscellany* automatically confers Associate membership. Further details are available from the Director, P. Lal, at the WORKSHOP address: 162/92 Lake Gardens, Calcutta 700045, India (Phone: 473-4325 and 473-2683).